"Tis the Season for Nostalgia: Holiday Reminiscing Can Have Psychological Benefits

Seven questions from the American Psychological Association (APA) for Krystine Batcho, PhD, a nostalgia expert

Nostalgia is particularly prominent around the holidays and it can have a significant psychological effect on people, both good and bad. Psychologist and APA member, Krystine Batcho, PhD, is a professor at Le Moyne College in Syracuse, NY, and an expert on nostalgia. Her research finds that people who are prone to nostalgia excel at maintaining personal relationships and choose healthy social ways of coping with their troubles. In 1995 she developed the “Nostalgia Inventory” test that measures how often and how deeply people feel nostalgic. Her tool has been translated into multiple languages, including Chinese, Polish, and Spanish.

APA: Why do holidays make people feel nostalgic?
Dr. Batcho: People feel more nostalgic during the holidays because many memories are reawakened and relationships renewed. During the holidays, families and friends get together to celebrate and reconnect; they get caught up on one another’s lives, reminisce, and browse through old photographs. Even from afar, friends and relatives get back in touch, with phone calls, letters, greeting cards, and posts on social networking sites. Like anniversaries and other temporal landmarks, holidays remind us of special times and help us keep track of what has changed and what has remained the same in our lives — and in ourselves. For many, holidays bring back memories of simpler times along with the sense of the security of childhood or the carefree feelings of being young, with fewer of the worries and stress that accompany responsibilities. Most often, holidays remind us of people who have played important roles in our lives and the activities we shared with them. This is one reason why people who are away from home are especially likely to feel nostalgic during the holidays and why so many people travel to be with family and friends.

APA: You’ve done research on how song lyrics can stir nostalgic feelings. Why does holiday music so often cause nostalgia?
Dr. Batcho: Music is especially evocative of emotion. Nostalgic song lyrics engage the listener in reverie and capture the bittersweet feeling of the past’s irretrievability. Some nostalgic song lyrics describe happy memories. For example, the country song, “Young,” recounts joyful experiences that typify the exuberance of youth. Not all nostalgic songs are happier than other songs; sometimes they remind us of loss. Songs, such as “Those Were the Days” and “Yesterday,” focus on how the passage of time inevitably brings changes in youthfulness, vigor, and the carefree innocence not yet jaded by the mistakes, difficulties and painful aspects of life. But the distinctive bittersweet affect characteristic of nostalgia can transform the sense of loss into a positive appreciation of how much we have enjoyed, how much we have survived and, most importantly, how much we have loved and have been loved.
Whether the emotional tone of a song is happy or sad, nostalgic lyrics can engage the listener in reflection on who they once were and how they have arrived at their present self. Whether secular or religious, by connecting us to a shared tradition, holiday music can renew our sense of belonging to something greater than ourselves. By reminding us of events, customs, beliefs, or rituals, holiday music can help us feel connected to others, even during times of stress or loneliness.

**APA:** Some people choose to replace holiday traditions by getting away to relax on a beach or going skiing rather than gathering around a Christmas tree, lighting Hanukah candles, or celebrating in other ways. Why are some people less nostalgic than others?

**Dr. Batcho:** It is not yet clear why some people are more prone to nostalgia than others. Research suggests, however, that more nostalgic individuals tend to feel emotions more strongly. In general, nostalgic people are not happier or sadder than less nostalgic people, but they feel emotions more intensely. What role, if any, childhood experiences play in proneness to nostalgia has not yet been determined. Some research suggests that nostalgic individuals have more positive feelings toward the past and remember feeling more positive emotions as a child. Childhood events themselves seem to be less strongly related to later nostalgia than how a child felt about the events. It is not the number of parties, gifts, or awards, but the extent to which a child felt happy, proud, or loved. It could be that people, who are more socially connected early in life, are more likely to become nostalgic. But, just as holidays can remind some people of happy childhood experiences, they can also remind other people of unpleasant ones. If holidays were associated with greater stress, family discord, or unhappiness, an individual might well avoid painful memories by creating new holiday traditions.

**APA:** Research has shown that nostalgia can be a very positive emotion and is even linked to higher self-esteem. Why is that?

**Dr. Batcho:** In contrast to a long history of theories that conceptualized nostalgia as detrimental, considerable contemporary research suggests that nostalgia can be associated with a number of psychological benefits. Nostalgic reminiscence helps a person maintain a sense of continuity despite the constant flow of change over time. It is reassuring to realize how rich our lives have been – how much joy, hard work, success and excitement we have experienced. During difficult times, attention to our past can strengthen us by reminding us of how we survived challenges, loss, injury, failure, or misfortune in the past. When we are sad or discouraged, it can be uplifting to remember that we are still the person who had been happy, strong and productive at times in our past.

Our sense of who we are is closely related to how we see ourselves in relation to others. Research has shown that nostalgia can strengthen a sense of social connectedness by helping us appreciate what we have meant to others as well as what others have meant to us. Nostalgia can help a person cope with loneliness by enhancing the sense of social support that comes from knowing that each of us is someone’s daughter or son, mother or father, sister or brother. Nostalgic memories can help someone who is away from home or someone who is mourning the death of a family member by reminding us that the bonds we share with those we love survive physical separation.

**APA:** If nostalgia is more often linked to good memories than bad, how does that affect the
accuracy of memories?

Dr. Batcho: Considerable research has shown that autobiographical memories are often inaccurate with respect to details. It is not known, however, whether nostalgic memories are more or less accurate than other memories. Some research suggests that nostalgic individuals do not differ in memory ability compared with less nostalgic individuals. However, nostalgic people tend to recall more memories in which other people play an important role. The events remembered are not always happy ones. Nostalgic memories can also focus on sad events, such as the death of a loved one, or even stressful events such as an accident, an illness, or a major storm. What distinguishes a memory as nostalgic is typically the important role played by another — such as the presence and support of family or friends during a crisis. While many specific details of events can be forgotten or recalled inaccurately, it is possible that the emotions felt during the event remain intact. When recalling autobiographical experiences from a distant past, individuals often make note that they can’t remember exactly how something happened, but they remember feeling scared, proud, embarrassed, happy, or disappointed. Long after the facts have faded, the feelings remain.

APA: Can people feel true nostalgia for eras they never experienced – e.g., Millennials feeling a special affinity for the '60s or baby boomers hankering for the Roaring '20s?

Dr. Batcho: People can feel nostalgia for eras they never experienced, but research suggests that such a feeling is a different type of nostalgia, referred to as historical or social nostalgia. Individuals who feel nostalgia for a past era are more likely to feel dissatisfied with the present and/or perceive a past time period as better than the present. Compared to individuals who are nostalgic for their own past, referred to as personal nostalgia, people who feel greater historical nostalgia rely less heavily on others to define their self-identity and rely more heavily on solitary experiences in understanding who they are.

It is also possible that someone can like an era they had never lived in without feeling nostalgia for it. Literary, film, and artistic portrayals of the past can represent idealized versions or select dimensions that have universal appeal. The romanticized view of close family ties and a simpler way of living in the past can be attractive for its own inherent value. Someone might love the beauty of an art form or fashion distinctive of an era or admire the courage and perseverance of individuals overcoming the challenges of war, famine, or financial deprivation without feeling the sense of loss that accompanies personal nostalgia or the preference for the past that characterizes historical nostalgia.

APA: Does any particular demographic group (age, gender, race, socio-economic status, nationality) show a tendency to be more nostalgic?

Dr. Batcho: Whether certain groups show a tendency to be more nostalgic has not yet been adequately researched. So far, studies suggest that nostalgia is a universal phenomenon, and theorists often point to evidence of nostalgia in literature and music in different cultures over centuries of recorded history. Contemporary research suggests that men and women do not differ significantly in the tendency toward nostalgia. Some research suggests that people can feel nostalgic at any age, even as young as five or six years old. However, what a person feels nostalgic for might differ depending upon one’s life stage. For example, a young child would be more likely to feel nostalgic for past toys or pets, whereas an older person would be more likely to feel nostalgic for family or the music that had been popular during their youth. Some studies
have indicated that overall nostalgia peaks during early adulthood rather than among the elderly. However, it is likely that nostalgia waxes and wanes over the lifespan as a function of major developmental or life-stage transitions. During times of transition, nostalgia helps us maintain a sense of stability, ensuring that the person we are is not lost amid the inevitable flux of life.

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